The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians

This is a modern translation of the epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians, the same church that Paul wrote to almost a century earlier.

Polycarp was a noted and respected bishop of Smyrna, one of only two churches not admonished by Jesus in the seven letters found in Revelation 2 and 3.

Polycarp was burned at the stake in A.D. 150 or shortly thereafter at the ripe age of 86. The story of his martyrdom is impressive for his courage, wit, and kindness, and it is recounted on my Christian Martyrs page.

The contents of this letter speak for themselves. The apostolic spirit, fatherly heart, and deep spiritual understanding of this great apostolic father shine through in every word.

The letter is simply updated to modern English from the translation found in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. I. The chapter titles belong to the Edinburgh translators of that extensive collection of early Christian writings.

Thank you to Pamela Kline, age 17, who did the initial updating of the grammar and vocabulary for me.

Ad:

Our books consistently maintain 4-star and better ratings despite the occasional 1- and 2-star ratings from people angry because we have no respect for sacred cows.

Please note that I have opted to change "Christ" to "King" or "the King."

I did this because in Jewish usage, the word means any person who's been anointed with oil for God's service. In ancient Israel, that would be a king, priest or prophet. In the Messiah's case, he is anointed with the Spirit of God to be all three, but he is primarily the King who delivers Israel from bondage.

"Christ," on the other hand, has become religious jargon with very little meaning. It is primarily used today as one of Jesus' names, losing the rich tradition of the Hebrew word *meshiach*. "King" preserves it much better ... especially once it is given an explanation like this .

Polycarp's Introduction to the Epistle to the Philippians

Polycarp, and the elders with him, to the Church of God sojourning at Philippi: Mercy and peace be multiplied to you from God Almighty and from the Lord Jesus the King, our Savior.

Chapter 1

I have greatly rejoiced with you in our Lord Jesus Christ because you have followed the example of true love. You have accompanied, as is fitting, those who were bound in chains—the appropriate ornaments of saints, which are the real crowns of the true elect of God.

The strong root of your faith, spoken of in days long passed, have lasted until now and borne fruit to our Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered even to the point of death for our sins, but whom God raised from the dead, releasing the grip of Hades. "He is the one that though you do not see, you believe in, and, believing, you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Pet. 1:8). Into this joy many long to enter, knowing that "by grace you are saved, not of works, but by the will of God through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 2:8-9 w. Jn. 1:13).

Chapter 2

Therefore, prepare yourselves for the race and serve the Lord in fear and truth like people who have forsaken the useless, empty talk and the errors of the multitude and believed in the One who raised up our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and gave him glory and a throne at his right hand.

All things in heaven and on earth are subject to him. Every spirit serves him. He comes as the Judge of the living and the dead. God will require justice for his blood from those who do not believe in Him.

But the One who raised Christ from the dead will raise us also, if we do his will, walk in his commandments, love what he loved, and keep ourselves from all unrighteousness, greed, love of money, evil speaking, and lies. In addition, we must not return evil for evil, accusation for accusation, blow for blow, nor curse for curse. Instead keep in mind what the Lord said in his teaching: "Do not judge, so that you are not judged; forgive, and you will be forgiven; show mercy, so that you may obtain mercy; for as you portion it out to others, so it will be apportioned back to you." And in addition: The poor are blessed, as well as those that are persecuted because of righteousness, because the kingdom of God belongs to them.

Chapter 3

Brothers, I am not writing these things that concern righteousness to you because I took it upon myself to do so, but because you invited me to. Neither I nor anyone else can live up to the wisdom of the blessed and glorified Paul.

When he was among you, he accurately and consistently taught the word of truth in front of those who were living then. When he was away from you, he wrote you a letter. If you study that letter, you will it find it to be the way to build you up in the faith you have been given, which—when it is followed by hope and preceded by love towards God, Christ, and our neighbor—is the mother of us all.

For if anyone has these graces inside and is moved by them, he has fulfilled the command of righteousness, since the one that has love is far from all sin.

Chapter 4

The love of money is a root of every kind of evil. Therefore, since we know that just as we brought nothing into this world, so we can carry nothing out, let us arm ourselves with the armor of righteousness.

First, let us teach ourselves to walk in the commandments of the Lord. Next, teach the wives to walk in the faith that has been given to them. Teach them to truly be tender to their own husbands in love and purity, loving everyone else equally in chastity. Teach them to train up their children to know and fear God.

Teach the widows to careful in regard to the faith of the Lord, to pray continually for everyone, and to be far from all slander, evil speaking, lying, love of money, and every kind of evil, knowing that they are the altar of God, that he clearly sees everything, and that nothing is hidden from him—not our reasoning, our reflection, nor any of the secret things in our heart.

Chapter 5

Therefore, since we know that God is not mocked, we ought to walk worthy of his commandment and glory. In the same way, the deacons should be blameless before the face of his righteousness, since they are the servants of God and Christ and not of men. They must not be slanderers, double-tongued, nor lovers of money, but self-controlled in everything, compassionate, industrious, and walking according to the truth of the Lord, who was everyone's servant.

Expressions of Personal Unworthiness

Declaring oneself unworthy is something most early Christian writers were careful to do.

For example, Ignatius, though one of the most revered bishops of his time—the head elder of Antioch, the church that first sent out Paul and Barnabas—told the Magnesians, "Though I am in chains, I am not worthy to be compared to any of you that are free" (*Magnesians* 12).

Irenaeus, too, had the same humility, though he was even more prestigious in his time than Ignatius. He was an almost lone representative of the apostolic age due to his relationship with the aged Polycarp. Nonetheless, he writes to the bishop of Rome—an official of the church that he found necessary

If we please him in this present world, we will also receive the future world. After all, he has promised us that he will raise us from the dead and that if we live worthy of him, we will also reign with him—provided only that we believe.

Similarly, let the young men be blameless in all everything. Let them be especially careful to preserve purity and rein themselves in, as though they had a bridle, from every kind of evil. For it is good that they should be removed from the lusts that are in the world, since every lust wars against the spirit. Neither the sexually immoral, the effeminate, nor homosexuals shall inherit the kingdom of God. Nor shall those who do inconsistent and inappropriate things.

Accordingly, it is necessary to abstain from all these things and to submit to the elders and deacons as though to God and Christ. The virgins should also walk in a blameless and pure conscience.

Chapter 6

Let the elders be compassionate and merciful to everyone, bringing back those who wander, visiting the sick, and not neglecting the widow, orphan, or poor. They should always watch out for what is suitable in the sight of God and man and abstain from all wrath, partiality, and unjust judgment.

They should keep far away from all greed, avoid quickly believing a negative report about anyone, and not be severe in judgment since we are all under a debt of sin. If, then, we entreat the Lord to forgive us, we ought to forgive others; we are before the eyes of our Lord and God, and we must all appear at the judgment seat of Christ. There everyone must give an account of himself.

So let us serve him in fear and with reverence, just as he has commanded us and just as the apostles, who have preached the Gospel to us, and the prophets, who proclaimed in advance the coming of the Lord, [have taught us to do].

Let us be zealous in pursuing what is good, guard ourselves against giving offense, and keep ourselves from false brothers and those who bear the name of the Lord in hypocrysy and who draw proud men away into error.

Chapter 7

The Ante-Nicene Fathers gives a title to this chapter that includes "warnings about the Docetae." The "docetae" are the gnostics, who were called docetae (or *dividers into two*) because they made a sharp separation between material and spiritual things,

to correct on occasion—and says, "You will not expect from me ... any beauty and persuasiveness of style, to which I make no pretentions. Instead, I trust you will accept in a kindly spirit what I write in a similar spirit simply, honestly, and in my own homely way, while you yourself—since you are more capable than I am—will expand those ideas which I send to you" (*Against Heresies* I:preface:3).

There are exceptions, which seem humorous by comparison.

declaring all material things evil and the product of a false god.

Whoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist, and whoever does not confess the testimony of the cross is of the devil. Whoever perverts the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts and says that there is neither a resurrection or a judgment is the firstborn of Satan.

Therefore, let us forsake the vanity of many and their false doctrines. Let us return to the message which has been handed down to us from the beginning, guarding against the enemy in prayer and persevering in fasting. In our entreaties, let us beseech the all-seeing God not to lead us into temptation; as the Lord has said, "The spirit truly is willing but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41).

Chapter 8

Let us then continually persevere in our hope and the security of our righteousness, which is Jesus Christ who bore our sins in his own body on the tree. He who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth (1 Pet. 2:22), but who endured all things for us so that we might live in Him. Let us then be imitators of his patience. If we suffer for his name's sake, let us glorify him. For he has set us this example in himself, and we have believed that.

Chapter 9

I exhort you all to yield obedience to the word of righteousness and to exercise all patience, such as you have seen before your eyes not only in the case of the blessed Ignatius, Zosimus, Rufus, and also among yourselves, but also in Paul himself and the rest of the apostles. We are assured that these all have not run in vain, but in faith and righteousness, and that they are now in their due place in the presence of the Lord, with whom they also suffered. For they did not love not this present world, but him who died for us and for our sakes and was raised again by God from the dead.

Chapter 10

Therefore stand fast in these things and follow the example of the Lord. Being firm and unchangeable in the faith, love the brotherhood, be attached to one another, joined together in the truth; exhibit the meekness of the Lord in your interaction with one another, and despise no one. When you can do good, do not avoid it because alms delivers from death. All of you be subject to one another having your conduct blameless among the gentiles so that you may both receive praise for your good works and the Lord may not be blasphemed through you. Woe to him by whom the name of the Lord is blasphemed! Therefore teach seriousness to all and also display it in your own conduct.

Chapter 11

I am greatly grieved for Valens, who was once an elder among you because he understands so little the place that was given to him in the Church. I exhort you, therefore, that you abstain from covetousness and that you be chaste and truthful. Abstain from every form

of evil. For if a man cannot govern himself in such matters how shall he require them of others? If a man does not keep himself from covetousness, he shall be defiled by idolatry and will be judged as one of the heathen. Who of us are ignorant of the judgment of the Lord? Don't we know that the saints shall judge the world as Paul teaches?

I have neither seen nor heard of any such thing among you in the midst of whom the blessed Paul labored and who are commended in the beginning of his letter [*to the Philippians, to whom Polycarp is also writing*]. He boasts of you in all those churches which at that time were the only ones who knew the Lord. We have not yet known him.

I am deeply grieved, therefore, brothers, for Valens and his wife, to whom may the Lord grant true repentance. So be moderate in regard to this matter and do not count such as enemies but call them back as suffering and straying members that you may save your whole body. For by acting in this way, you shall edify yourselves.

Chapter 12

I trust that you are well versed in the Sacred Scriptures and that nothing is hidden from you. This privilege is not yet granted to me. It is declared, then, in the Scriptures, "Be angry and do not sin, nor let the sun go down upon your wrath" (Eph. 4:26). Happy is the one who remembers this, which I believe to be the case with you.

May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ Himself, who is the Son of God and our everlasting High Priest, build you up in faith, truth, meekness, gentleness, patience, endurance, forbearance, and purity. May he bestow on you a lot and portion among his saints, along with us, and on all that are under heaven who shall believe in our Lord Jesus Christ and in his Father, who raised him from the dead.

Pray for all the saints. Pray also for kings, rulers, princes, and for those who persecute and hate you; also for the enemies of the cross that your fruit may be apparent to all and that you may be perfect in him.

Chapter 13

Both you and Ignatius wrote to me saying that if anyone went into Syria, he should carry your letter with him. I will attend to this request if I find a fitting opportunity, either personally or through some other acting for me, that your desire may be fulfilled.

The letters of Ignatius were written by him to us and all whom we have near us. We have sent [these] to you as you requested. They are subjoined to this letter and by them you may be greatly profited, for they treat of faith, patience, and everything that tends to edification in our Lord.

If you have any more certain information that you may have obtained in regard to either Ignatius himself or those who were with him, have the goodness to make it known to us.

Chapter 14

These things I have written to you by Crescens, whom I have been recommending to you up to the present time. He has acted blamelessly among us, and I believe he will also among you. Moreover, hold his sister in esteem when she comes to you.

Be safe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with you all. Amen.